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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MON
28 October 1985

Spy wars: a year of discontent

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Washington

Soviet efforts to unleash a new breed of smooth-mannered, sophisticated Russian spies in the West may be backfiring.

This assessment by former US intelligence officials comes following an unprecedentedly large number of arrests, defections, and countermoves this year among spies on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

In the United States:

- John A. Walker is expected to plead guilty in a Baltimore federal district court today to charges that he masterminded a four-man US Navy spy ring for the Soviets. Included in the plea arrangement is a purported understanding that Walker will detail the extent of his alleged 20-years of spying in exchange for leniency for his son, Michael, who is also expected to plead guilty to espionage charges.
- In Los Angeles, Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Richard W. Miller is on trial on charges that he passed counterintelligence secrets to the Soviets.
- Edward L. Howard, a former Central Intelligence Agency employee, last month apparently fled the US amid allegations that he told the Soviets the identity of a key US undercover informant in Moscow.

The Americans have clearly not been alone in taking casualties. The Soviet Union is said by experts to be reeling as a result of the recent defections of three well-placed Soviet intelligence officers.

"We have had to cope with a small hail storm and the Soviets have had to deal with an earthquake measuring 7 on the Richter scale," says George Carver, a former senior US intelligence official now at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Retired Adm. Bobby R. Inman, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, adds, "The defections must be a bonanza to US counterintelligence."

The recent Soviet defectors are:

- Vitaly Yurchenko, a senior Soviet KGB official who defected to the US Aug. 1 while on assignment in Rome. He has extensive knowledge of KGB operations in North America: It was Yurchenko who identified Mr. Howard as a Soviet spy.
- Oleg Gordievsky, the top KGB officer in London, who had worked for 10 years as a double agent for the West, defected to Britain sometime last summer. Using information he provided, the British government expelled 31 Soviets for spying. Gordievsky is also reported to have helped uncover Arne Treholt, a senior Norwegian government official convicted last June of passing Norwegian and NATO secrets to the KGB between 1974 and 1983.
- Sergei Bokhan, deputy director of Soviet military intelligence (GRU) operations in Greece, defected to the US in May. He is said to have detailed Soviet infiltration of the Greek government and fingered three indivduals who were providing sensitive information and technology to the Soviets.

Experts stress there is a broader significance to these Soviet defections beyond the immediate counterintelligence gains for the west.

"When three rather high-level people defect from the Soviet Union's intelligence service in a relatively brief period of time . . . that is an indication that there is some kind of malaise within their system," says retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, CIA director during the Carter administration.

Mr. Turner, author of the recent book "Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition," says that the spy activities and defections of recent months point up "that we in democracies are vulnerable, but the Soviets are vulnerable too."

The Soviets' vulnerability stems from what Mr. Carver calls the "how are you going to keep them down on the farm once they've seen Paris" syndrome. "The major difficulty that the Soviets have is the stark contrast between the promise of the 1917 revolution and the facts and realities of the Soviet Union today," Carver says.

Soviet KGB and GRU agents are among the privileged few in Soviet society, experts say. A KGB career is viewed among the Soviets' best and brightest as a means of getting ahead quickly in the bureaucracy. These ambitious recruits are sent to the finest schools and are ushered into the ranks of the Russian elite. They are trained in foreign languages, given the opportunity to travel, and are inevitably posted overseas. Mr.Inman says simply, they are "people who could mingle" at Washington social affairs.

"Those intelligence agents who have contact with the West, who have their eyes and ears open, it looks like they are very much disillusioned with communism . . . and this brings people to dramatic decisions," says Zdzislaw Rurarz, a Polish ambassador to Japan who defected to the US in 1981.

"They are seeing the confrontation between the East and the West and they are changing sides. This is very significant," says Mr. Rurarz, who served 25 years as a Polish military intelligence officer.

"Across the board, the level of sophistication of KGB agents has gone up," says Inman. He attributes this in large part to the work of former Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, who pushed to upgrade the effectiveness of Soviet intelligence operations during his tenure as KGB chief. But Inman says the jury is still out on whether the KGB's new sophistication and style has made it more vulnerable to defections and western infiltration.

Carver is less tentative. "Others in the KGB must be thinking: 'If Gordievsky and Yurchenko can safely defect why can't we do it? If we can't trust a Gordievsky or a Yurchenko, who can we trust?' "

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